



READING THE BLUES: THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY  
IN SELECTED POEMS OF LANGSTON HUGHES, GLORIA  
NAYLOR'S NOVEL THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE, AND  
BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL'S NOVEL YOUR BLUES  
AIN'T LIKE MINE

THESIS

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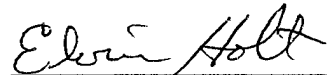
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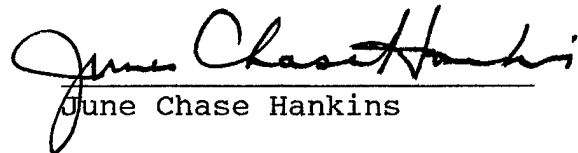
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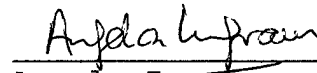
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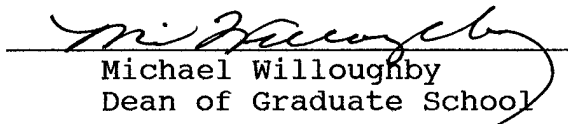


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Dedicated to Vernon and Marsha

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## CHAPTER I

### THE INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL BLUES VOICE IN AMERICAN SLAVE SONGS

Langston Hughes, Gloria Naylor, and Bebe Moore Campbell use the blues in their poetry and fiction to highlight the relationship between the individual and the community; however, African culture and American slavery influenced the development of the personal and group dynamics of the blues long before a blues literary tradition emerged. This chapter on slave songs, the precursors to today's blues, focuses on the emergence of the blues with an emphasis on the individual and community. The relationship between a single slave and the slave community influences the blues musical and literary traditions, reflecting both the individual and community. An understanding of the individual, the community, and the interaction between the two in slave songs is a prerequisite for a valid analysis of Langston Hughes's Selected Poetry of Langston Hughes, Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, and Bebe Moore Campbell's Your Blues Ain't Like Mine.

Slave songs, spirituals, and blues are indigenous American musical forms grounded in the African musical tradition and American slavery (Murray, The Omni-Americans



60). John Rublowsky, author of Black Music in America, writes that in

a hostile new world under the worst possible circumstances, the African was compelled to create a new tradition, a new myth in place of his obliterated past. And in the consolation of this new tradition, the creativity of the African centered primarily upon music--music was his solace and release. (10)

The slave songs, mixtures of African and Christian traditions, functioned as precursors to the blues in structure, form, and theme. While providing a catharsis from the burden of captivity, the slave songs assimilated individual human experience into a collective consciousness. In his book Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Lawrence W. Levine writes that "Negroes sang in groups surrounded by and responding to other singers, melting their individual consciousness into the group consciousness" (217). Today, the blues musical and literary traditions bear characteristics of the slave songs that reflect the individual and communal experiences of the past in modern works.

Within the system of slavery, when the white man squelched the black man's freedom of expression, slaves disguised their feelings about slavery in song and music. In From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, John Hope Franklin writes,

Any understanding of his reaction to his slave status must be approached with the realization that the Negro at times was possessed of a dual personality: he was one person at one time and quite a different person at another time. (206)

This dual personality facilitated expression because it disguised anti-white and anti-slavery sentiments, protecting the slave from the retributions of white men. In The Negro and His Songs, Howard Odum and Guy Johnson also comment on this dual personality:

Recently a number of writers have pointed out something of the dual personality for himself and his race and one for the white folk with whom he comes in contact. This situation is not new to Southern whites who have observed discriminatingly and have been frankly willing to see the situation; it is the merest commonplace to the Negro, a situation about which he has had his fun all along, albeit also his very serious disposition of the matter. (6-7)

In Africa, the dual personality did not exist. The music allowed a freedom of expression. It

served the dual purpose of not only preserving communal values and solidarity but also providing occasions for the individual to transcend, at least symbolically, the inevitable restrictions of his environment and his society by permitting him

to express deeply held feelings which ordinarily could not be verbalized. (Levine 7-8)

Through song, the Africans could "openly express their feelings about each other and their leaders" (8). Levine refers to the Ashanti, Dahomeans, Chopi, Ibo, Ewe, Yoruba, Jukun, Sashi, Tiv and the Hausa as examples of African peoples who "could utilize their songs as outlets for individual release without disturbing communal solidarity" (9-10).

In America, the black slave songs provided this same type of outlet. These songs typified an oral tradition where the "cries, falsettos, slurs and other African expressive modes found their way directly to Afro-American music during the slave era" (Wilson, Music 18). Much debate surrounds the origin and development of slave songs and later the blues, but both the African cultures and the American slave experience influenced the development of the blues. The African people adapted to the environment of American slavery by blending slave experiences with their native African culture (Levine 138-139). In Blues People, LeRoi Jones calls the blues

a native American music, the product of the black man in this country; or to put it more exactly, the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives. (17)

The words "Africa" and "America" do not emphasize location as much as they emphasize the culture and experience associated with the location. In Toward the African Revolution, Frantz Fanon suggests that "the Blues--the Black slave lament--was offered up for the admiration of the oppressors . . ." (37). He also notes that "[w]ithout oppression and without racism you have no blues. The end of racism would sound the knell of great Negro music" (37). Many try to extend the blues beyond the "authentic black experience in America," but by doing so, they miss its development "as a consequence of ubiquitous white racism and the prevalent color consciousness" (Blackwell 124). The blues tradition embodies the experience of a people; that experience includes the transplanted African culture in America, the oppression of slavery, and the racism that exists in this country today.

Jerome Dowd, author of The Negro in American Life, explains how

the original poetry which belonged to the African folk music was lost in transit to America, but the emotional tone and rhythm were transferred to new compositions, partly original and partly imitative modifications of hymns sung by white people.

(335)

Because of their African roots and traditions, the slaves resisted complete integration into the American culture (Levine 138-139). Remnants of their African folklore

survived to be incorporated into the American slave songs. According to Steven C. Tracy, in Langston Hughes and the Blues, the

folklore is generated by a group with a particular ethos related to time, place, and socioeconomic condition as well, and because it comes into being in this type of 'elusive' environment, it reflects sayings, tales, songs, religion, superstitions, signs, symbols, crafts, clothes, gravemarkers--all these and more are part of the folklore of a particular group. (13)

While many elements of African folklore survived through music and other oral traditions, the slave songs often reflected the white man's culture and musical tradition. The confrontation between the African and American slave cultures demonstrates how the blues were "always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experience of Africans in the New World" (Baker 5). The blues developed as a result of the interface between the African and American slave cultures. African culture and experience, over generations, began to disappear as American culture and experience replaced them. However, African oral traditions such as repetition, call and response, and the cry and holler survived. The effects of this clash between the two traditions influenced the structure and theme of the slaves' songs.

Because the slave songs reveal the emotions of a captive people, a relationship exists between the blues as emotion and the blues as song. John Wesley Work articulates this relationship when he writes of slave songs,

There were times when the very depth of pain and sorrow were (sic) sounded, the awfulness of which was beyond his power to speak, but the pent-up feelings must find some expression which would as nearly as possible, represent in essence the pain itself. (22)

Frederick Douglass also identifies the turbulent emotion of slave songs; he

sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. (31)

"Oh, Wretched Man That I Am," as indicated by the first person singular, exemplifies the emotion of an individual slave:

Oh, Wretched Man That I Am

Chorus

Oh, wretched man that I am;

Oh, wretched man that I am;

Oh, wretched man that I am;

Who will deliver poor me?

1. I'm bowed down with a burden of woe,  
 I'm bowed down with a burden of woe,  
 I'm bowed down with a burden of woe,  
 Who will deliver poor me?

2. My heart's filled with sadness and pain,  
 My heart's filled with sadness and pain,  
 My heart's filled with sadness and pain,  
 Who will deliver poor me? (qtd. in Work 53)

The blues articulated in this song reveal a similar depth of emotion mentioned by Work and Douglass. Other examples include "I Must Walk My Lonesome Valley," "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," and "Oh, Nobody Knows the Trouble I See" (qtd. in Work 50-60).

Not all slave songs echoed such despair, and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., in The Power of Black Music, distinguishes between sorrow songs and jubilee songs. The sorrow songs,<sup>1</sup> he says, "speak of the past and present trials and tribulations suffered by the slaves and their Savior" (41) whereas the "[j]ubilees<sup>2</sup> express the joyful expectation of a better life in the future" (42). Both songs, whether joyful or sorrowful, reveal a desire for freedom. Floyd writes that "[e]xpressive of the plight of the transplanted African in a new land, black song helped the slaves bridge the newly created cultural gap by serving them in their daily activities" (52). These activities included "in-group and out-group satire, songs of nostalgia, nonsense songs,

children's songs, lullabies, songs of play and work and love" (Levine 15). Songs eased the transition from African culture to the new slave culture. As a daily activity, the singing acted as a temporary relief and freedom from the perpetual oppression of slavery (Levine 15).

Initially, because music and rhythm allowed slaves to communicate rebellion, the white slavemaster denied the slaves any access to the musical instruments of their African heritage or American equivalents. Anti-drum laws sought to prevent revolts and signals (Wilson, Music 20-21). Although a threat to the operation of the white slave holders, Bruce Cook writes that "[c]ommunication, at least in the form of music, seems to have been complete and fairly common among them [the slaves]" (54). Eventually slave owners discovered productivity increased when the slaves sang in the fields (Floyd 50); however, the slaves "deliberately encode[d] their music and express[ed] themselves metaphorically to disguise their attitude about their lives" (Tracy 15). The slaves used song to expose their daily lives, their white oppressors, and their laments of captivity. The white man allowed this expression, partly because of his ignorance of each song's meaning and partly because he viewed song as a tool for greater productivity (Levine 212-213).

The white man also allowed the black slave to sing spirituals. This type of song developed as a result of the white man's attempts to "Christianize" the "heathen" black



man. Because many spirituals reflected the religious beliefs of the white man, Samuel Charters, in The Legacy of the Blues, questions the extent to which the spiritual actually reflected slave life as opposed to a "simple repetition of the cliches of white religion" (80). In the native African culture, no distinction existed between sacred and profane music (Floyd 54). These two classifications developed for the slaves because of the American tradition of distinguishing between "religious" and "non-religious." In contrast to African tradition, the slave recognized the spiritual as separate from everyday work songs, with "the distinction between sacred and secular becoming more and more a part of the growing Christianization of the African-American psyche" (Floyd 45-46).

The spiritual displays elements of African oral tradition such as the call-and-response and textual improvisation (54). In The Power of Black Music, Floyd suggests,

In the circumstance of slavery, the spiritual was the transplanted Africans' primary means of expressing their current struggles and fulfillments while maintaining contact with the traditions and meanings of the past. (40)

In "This Ole World's a Hell to Me" the slave maintains elements of the African oral tradition such as repetition,

rhyme, and rhythm while still commenting on his present circumstance.

Dear brother, don't you leave,  
 Dear brother, don't you leave,  
 Dear brother, don't you leave,  
 This ole world's a hell to me.

This ole world's a hell to me,  
 This ole world's a hell to me.

Yes I 'bleeged to leave this world,  
 Yes I 'bleeged to leave this world,  
 Sister, I's 'bleeged to leave this world  
 For it's a hell to me. (qtd. in Odum and Johnson  
 116)

After emancipation, the spiritual fell into disfavor as a result of the incorporation of African oral traditions like shouting, repetition, and call and response. Many people in the black community viewed them as "savage, lascivious, and lewd" (Floyd 38), but this negative reception was not limited to the spirituals. Eileen Southern asserts that "the blues was generally associated with the lowly--received with warmth in the brothels and saloons of the sporting world, but rejected by respectable people" (336). For many, the blues and spirituals portrayed a demeaning picture of black life.

The individual and communal characteristics of the later blues develop from the personal and group dynamics of the slave songs. According to Levine, the

form and structure of slave music presented the slave with a potential outlet for his individual feelings even while it continually drew him back into the communal presence and permitted him the comfort of basking in the warmth of the shared assumptions of those around him. (33)

Langston Hughes writes that the "[s]pirituals are group songs, but the Blues are songs you sing alone" (*Songs Called* 159). However, each blues song encompasses both an individual and communal perspective (Levine 29). Levine writes:

[i]ndividual voices had been prominent in Afro-American music before the rise of blues. In both church music and secular work songs, song leaders were important, but in both cases their contributions blended into an antiphonal communal situation. (217)

For example, the blues singer merges a personal blues experience into the more communal blues experience of the audience. In this way, the blues singer moves from the individual to the group. For the slave songs, however, the song of the individual mirrors the song of the slave community.

The equation  $I = C$  depicts the relationship between the individual and the community within slave songs, where  $I$  represents all individual slaves and where  $C$  represents the entire slave community. As the equation demonstrates, no difference exists between the individual and communal expression. The desire for freedom that both express causes this equality,  $I = C$ . John Lovell, Jr., recognizes the "Negro's obsession for freedom, abundantly proved by every firsthand document connected with the slave himself" (134). The slave song contains "revolutionary sentiments" and reveals the slaves' "desire to fly to free territory" (132). The following verse supports this idea:

You got a right,  
I got a right,  
We all got a right to eat of the tree of life  
(137)

Thoughts of freedom permeated the slaves' daily existence, although many contend the slave adapted to slavery by placing all hope in the next life in accord with Christian doctrine. Songs such as "In the Morning," "My Soul's Goin' to Heaven," and "Join De Heaven Wid De Angels" (Odum and Johnson 102-103) might support this idea, but the fact remains that the slaves lived with vivid "pictures of masters, overseers, auctioneers and buyers, patrollers, and other brutalizers of men" (Lovell 131). Outwardly, the spiritual reflects a religious group of people; however, as "Go Down, Moses" demonstrates, the spiritual expresses a

longing for freedom in an Old Testament context, a context in which Moses, the Promised Land, and Egypt all relate to the environment of the American slave.

Go Down, Moses

When Israel was in Egypt's land,  
Let my people go;  
Oppressed so hard dey could not stand,  
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt's land,  
Tell ole Pha-roh,  
Let my people go.

Thus saith de Lord, bold Moses said,  
Let my people go;  
If not I'll smite your first-born dead,  
Let my people go.

No more shall dey in bondage toil,  
Let my people go;  
Let dem come out wid Egypt's spoil,  
Let my people go. (qtd. in Kearns 7)

"Go Down, Moses," does not specifically make mention of American slavery, yet freedom is a central theme. In other songs, Lovell writes, "Israelites meant freedom for the slaves; Canaan meant Canada" (130). Sterling Brown notes:

[t]oo many rash critics have stated that the spirituals showed the slave turning his back on this world for the joys of the next. The truth is that he took a good look at this world and told what he saw. (18)

Lovell writes that "[r]eligion enhances the power and desire of the folk to reveal their deepest social selves" (132). Because of its relationship to religion, the spiritual provided a means of revealing the part of the slaves' inner being that desired and yearned for freedom.

While the call for freedom emanated from individual slaves, it also reflected a communal expression. While instances of individual slave expression existed, the individual voice and the communal voice projected a similar, if not identical, sentiment. The equation  $I = C$  suggests that the individual sang only the songs of the community. The community embodied the individual's frustration and worry concerning freedom in what Levine labels "an improvisational communal consciousness" (29). The slave songs, of course, relied on the contributions of individual slaves, as they were "simultaneously the result of individual and mass creativity" (29), but no escape from the influence and reality of slavery was possible. Slave music "was created or constantly recreated through a communal process," (30), but this communal effort very much aligned itself with the slaves' obsession with freedom. Within the communal voice, the individual found an outlet of personal

expression, for the two merged into the same song (33). Regardless of the singer, the time, or the location, the theme of many songs focused on oppression and enslavement. In "Didn' My Lord Deliver Daniel?" and "Free at Las" this theme is evident:

Didn' My Lord Deliver Daniel?

God deliver'd Daniel from the lions' den,  
Jonah from de belly of de whale,  
And de Hebrew children from de firey furnace,  
An' why not every man?

Didn' my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,  
deliver, Daniel,  
Didn' my Lord deliver Daniel, and why not every  
man?

Set my foot on de gospel ship,  
An' de ship began to sail,  
It landed me over on Canaan's shore,  
An' I'll never come back no more. (qtd. in Kearns  
7-8)

Free at Las'

Free at las', free at las',  
I thank God I'm free at las';  
Free at las', free at las'  
I thank God I'm free at las', free at las'.

Way down yonder in de graveyard walk,  
 I thank God I'm free at las';  
 Me an' my Jesus gwineter meet an' talk,  
 I thank God I'm free at las', etc.

On a my knees when de light pass by,  
 I thank God I'm free at las';  
 Tho't my soul woulda rise an' fly,  
 I thank God I'm free at las', etc.

Some o'dese mornin's bright an' fair,  
 I thank God I'm free at las';  
 Gwinter meet my Jesus in de middle of de air,  
 I thank God I'm free at las', etc. (qtd. in  
 Kearns 8-9)

Levine identifies the ultimate freedom of God's chosen people from the bonds of slavery as the "most persistent single image" of the slave songs (33).

Certainly, from the slave's perspective, each man was defined as an individual, regardless of the white man's view. Julius Lester, in To Be a Slave writes

[t]o be a slave was to be a human being under conditions in which that humanity was denied. . . . They who were held as slaves looked upon themselves and the servitude in which they found themselves with the eyes and minds of human



beings, conscious of everything that happened to them, conscious of all that went on around them.

(28)

The slaves considered themselves individuals, but without the communal art form of the slave song, individual expression as a catharsis, an escape, and a relief became almost impossible. The white slaveholders, in their resistance to slave expression, also sought to suppress unique or highly personalized individual expression. Slavery, and consequently the slaves' perspectives on freedom, highlight the individual and communal nature in the slave songs as the precursors to the blues musical and literary traditions. Placing the early slave songs within their historical context and understanding their individual and communal dynamics will illuminate my analysis of the role of the individual and community in selected works by Langston Hughes, Gloria Naylor, and Bebe Moore Campbell, writers who work within the blues literary tradition.

---

Notes

1 "Farewell, My Dear Mother."

*Refrain*

Farewell, my dear mother;  
Farewell, my dear mother;  
Farewell, my dear mother;  
Mother, mother, mother, mother!


1. For now I must leave you,  
Now I must leave you;  
Oh, now I must leave you,  
Leave you, leave you, leave you, leave you.
2. I'll meet you in heaven;  
I'll meet you in heaven;  
I'll meet you in heaven;  
Heaven, Heven, Heaven, Heaven! (qtd. in Work 52-53)

2 "Shout All Over God's Heaven."

1. I got a cross,  
You got a cross,  
All-a-God's children got a cross,  
When I get to Heaven,  
Goin' to lay down my cross,  
Goin' to shout all over God's Heaven,  
Heaven, Heaven.

Everybody talking about Heaven ain't goin' there,  
Heaven, Heaven.

Shout all over God's Heaven.

2. I got a song,  
You got a song,  
All-a-God's children got a song,  
When I get to Heaven,  
Goin' to sing a new song,  
Goin' to sing all over God's Heaven,  
Heaven, Heaven.  
Everybody talking about Heaven ain't goin' there,  
Heaven, Heaven.  
Sing all over God's Heaven. (qtd. in Work 48)
- 

## CHAPTER II

### THE TYPE CHARACTER, INDIVIDUAL, AND COMMUNITY IN THE BLUES POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes incorporates the blues musical tradition into his blues poems, presenting the blues as both a personal and a social music (Paul Oliver, The Story of the Blues 6). Hughes uses a type character to demonstrate the relationship between the individual and the Harlem community in his poetry. The type character "embodies a substantial number of significant distinguishing characteristics of a group or a class" (Holman and Harmon 486). Hughes captures the characteristics of the Harlem community through the experiences and emotions of his individual characters and poems. Each blues poem represents experience, for the ". . . power of expression, or rather, of intimation concerning the deepest issues of black experience is pregnant in the blues" (Cooke 23). The type character assimilates these individual experiences into the all-inclusive Harlem community. Specifically, the type character, in accord with the blues tradition, permits the individual and the community to remain separate entities while facilitating the integration of the individual experience into the collectiveness of the community.

According to Onwuchekwa Jemie, author of Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry, Hughes writes "[l]iterature in which the masses of black people would find their life experiences reflected and illuminated; in which the community would find itself expressed" (24). In addition, R. Baxter Miller writes that

[a]gainst the backdrop of time, he [Langston Hughes] invokes dynamic feeling in order to subordinate and control personal loneliness, but he never excludes the communal response to societal history. (48)

The coexistence of the individual and the community in the blues poems supports Jemie's observations and is demonstrated by the equation  $I_1 + I_2 + I_3 + \dots + I_x = C$ . Each  $I$  represents the individual experience of a particular poem, while  $C$  represents the Harlem community, an assimilation of various individual experiences. Hughes develops a literary Harlem which allows

feeling support from and relatedness to other people; feeling that one belongs somewhere in the family, somewhere in the village, somewhere in the city, somewhere in the world, somewhere in the universe. (Spearman 43)

The type character, because it embodies many of the individual distinguishing characteristics of Harlem, represents the Harlem community ( $C$ ). Hughes presents these characteristics as the specific experiences portrayed in his

poems. Albert Murray notes that the "problem of every writer is how to make his personal sense of experience part of [the] artistic tradition of mankind at large" (The Hero 87-88). With the type character, Hughes finds a solution through the blues tradition which expresses both an individual and a communal voice.

Like the type character, the blues assimilate the experience of an individual singer into the communal experience of the audience. In his book Search for Identity in Black Poetry, Nirmal Bajaj writes:

[t]he singer articulates his private emotions and experiences. They are not radically different from those of other fellow beings in the audience. These kaleidoscopic but coherent pictures are communicated by the singer to create a sense of identity. Thus Hughes through the blues attempts at merging the self-image of the one with that of the others and transforms his intensely personal and private lament into a powerful self-image of the entire racial community. (102)

Moreover, the words, the thoughts, the passions and the reactions

to which he [the blues singer] has given voice are those that are shared by countless thousands of his fellows. . . . When the blues singer tells of his escape from disaster, when he addresses the absent woman that he loves, when he sings of the

train that may take him to a happier district, he sings to himself, but he is aware that others whom he does not know would sing the blues in like circumstances. (298-299)

The individual blues singer conveys his personal blues, eventually incorporating them into the community of his audience. Both the blues singer and the type character use personal experience as a building block for the communal expression.

The accuracy of Hughes's depiction of the Harlem community depends upon the presence of many individual experiences. Rawn Spearman describes Harlem as "no less than a giant magnet attracting unfulfilled blacks into a temporary, indeed delusive, promised land" (44). Langston Hughes goes beyond the glamour of the Harlem city life to capture a realistic picture of the individual in Harlem. In the poem "Morning After," the speaker gives insight into his daily living when he says,

So sick last night I  
 Didn't know my mind.  
 I drunk some bad lickar that  
 Almost made me blind (Hughes, Selected 43).

In "Hard Daddy" the speaker also expresses sentiments of daily folk life:

I cried on his shoulder but  
 He turned his back on me.  
 Cried on his shoulder but

He turned his back on me.

He said a woman's cryin's

Never gonna bother me. (150)

Hughes writes Harlem as he sees it, never straying far from the reality of the black folk life. His "theory and practice was to portray the ugliness as readily as the beauty of black life, the unsavory as readily as the admirable" (Jemie 18). Jemie says,

[w]hat he [Langston Hughes] wanted to do was to record and interpret the lives of the common black folk, their thoughts and habits and dreams, their struggle for political freedom and economic well-being. (1)

However, Hughes is not limited to pessimistic themes about the ordinary grime of daily living. In "Harlem Night Song" and "The Weary Blues," he presents a different picture of Harlem through a depiction of the night life:

Come,

Let us roam the night together

Singing

I love you.

Across

The Harlem roof-tops

Moon is shining.

Night sky is blue.



Stars are great drops  
Of golden dew.

Down the street  
A band is playing.

I love you.

Come,  
Let us roam the night together  
Singing. (Hughes, Selected 61)

When compared to "The Morning After," "Harlem Night Song" captures the magic of the city as well as the blues, portraying Harlem as adventuresome, exciting, and happy. In "The Weary Blues" Hughes writes,

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
I heard a Negro play.  
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night  
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.  
With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
O Blues!  
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool

He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues! (33)

"The Morning After," "Hard Daddy," "The Weary Blues," and "Harlem Night Song" portray two experiences of the city--the night life and the daily folk life. Hughes writes that "the Blues are *city* songs rising from the crowded streets of big towns, or beating against the lonely walls of hall bed-rooms where you can't sleep at night" (Hughes, *Songs Called the Blues* 159). The type character, as the voice of the city, embodies the full range of individual experiences produced in Harlem.

The type character also allows the blending of these individual experiences into Hughes's Harlem. The relationships between the individual speakers are key to this incorporation as demonstrated by the equation  $I_1 + I_2 + I_3 + \dots + I_x = C$ . Hughes uses the blues to obscure the distinctions among the speakers of various poems, creating a cohesion among the individual experiences. When collected, these common experiences define the type character as the community. Highly individualized characters and situations limit those who might empathize and sympathize with the experience because they appeal more to people in the same circumstance. On the other hand, a more widely shared experience allows readers to relate Hughes's characters to other people, situations, and circumstances in Harlem. By

maintaining generality, Hughes presents distinguishing characteristics of Harlem while opening a concrete and more inclusive Harlem experience to his readers. In his book Character in Literature, Baruch Hochman suggests that characters are "to be conceived as attitudes or moral stances, not as representations of people" (17). While Hughes does portray people, he also presents an experience which goes beyond an individual character. These experiences may be likened to Hochman's "attitudes or moral stances," and they also correspond to the distinguishing characteristics expressed in the definition of type character. Through the blues experiences, the individuals are mixed together into a community that embodies all of these experiences. Although the reader knows "Miss Blues'es Child" centers on lost love, Hughes limits the information, never revealing names, places, or specific details.

If the blues would let me,  
 Lord knows I would smile.  
 If the blues would let me,  
 I would smile, smile, smile.  
 Instead of that I'm cryin'--  
 I must be Miss Blues'es child. (Hughes, Selected  
 113).

In many cases, the characters' blues remain generalized, expressing a feeling of loneliness, frustration, or anger, and Hughes does not always reveal the specific incident responsible for the blues. He creates blues which reflect

the condition of life and not the reaction to a particular incident. For example, in "Blues At Dawn," the blues pertain more to a condition of daily living. "Blues At Dawn" applies to this character each morning he awakes. He says,

I don't dare start thinking in the morning.

I don't dare start thinking in the morning.

If I thought thoughts in bed,

Them thoughts would bust my head--

So I don't dare start thinking in the morning.

I don't dare remember in the morning

Don't dare remember in the morning.

If I recall the day before,

I wouldn't get up no more--

So I don't dare remember in the morning. (261)

Concerning the blues, Albert Murray says that

[s]ometimes you forget all about them in spite of yourself, but all too often the very first thing you realize when you wake up is that they are there again, settling in like bad weather, hovering like plague-bearing insects, swarming precisely as if they were blue demons dispatched on their mission of harassment by none other than the Chief Red Devil of all devils himself. . .

.(Stomping the Blues 3)

The poem "Hard Daddy" also presents the blues as a general condition without offering a specific reason for their presence. Hughes writes,

I went to ma daddy,  
Says Daddy I have got the blues.  
Went to ma daddy'  
Says Daddy I have got the blues.  
Ma daddy says, Honey,  
Can't you bring no better news? (150)

In both of these poems, "Blues at Dawn" and "Hard Daddy," the blues do not directly reflect a specific incident in the poem, but Hughes still conveys the blues. The fact that both speakers have the blues creates a bond between them, for when "others do listen to the blues singer, they frequently find that they have shared his experiences in one way or another" (Southern 333). While the experiences may vary, the resultant blues connect the characters, break down distinctions among them, and smooth the way for their assimilation into the communal expression of the type character.

Because of the personal and group dynamics of the blues tradition, however, the blues also preserve the personal identity of Hughes's characters. In Shadow and Act, Ralph Ellison describes the blues as

. . . an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in ones aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain,

and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (78-79)

Ellison also suggests that "[a]s a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (78-79). The autobiographical aspect of the personal blues relates to the individual characters and speakers in Hughes's poetry. These blues, before being brought into the community, reflect the emotion and experience of an individual as exemplified in "Monroe's Blues":

#### Monroe's Blues

Monroe's fell on evil days--  
His woman and his friend is dead.  
Monroe's fell on evil days,  
Can't hardly get his bread.

Monroe sings a little blues,  
His little blues is sad.  
Monroe sings a little blues--

*My woman and my friend is dead.* (Hughes, Selected  
116)

The word *sad* indicates emotion which personalizes Monroe's "little blues." With more information on the situation, the blues reflect Monroe's specific experience of losing both his woman and his friend. Through the blues and the

characters' experience, Hughes particularizes his speakers, maintaining the individual quality of the blues tradition.

Unlike "Blues at Dawn" and "Hard Daddy," "Early Evening Quarrel" and "Same In Blues" both exhibit a degree of detail that emphasizes the individual. Through personal experiences, individuality defines one part of the type character. For instance, "Same In Blues" includes a snippet of conversation between characters where "Lulu said to Leonard, I want a diamond ring" (Hughes, Selected 270). The lines

These parties  
On my party line--  
But that third party,  
Lord, ain't mine! (270)

also particularize the situation. Hughes uses a more specific incident to create a more distinctive individual. This detail maintains the individuals and their experiences as they are brought into the community. In "Early Evening Quarrel," the same effect results when the speaker says,

Where is that sugar, Hammond,  
I sent you this morning to buy?  
I say, where is that sugar  
I sent you this morning to buy?  
Coffee without sugar  
Makes a good woman cry. (44)

The type character encompasses these specific, individual experiences in "Early Evening Quarrel" as distinguishing

characteristics of Harlem (I). At the same time, it provides an all-inclusive overview of the community (C). For the strongest blues effect, Hughes preserves both the individual and the community.

Because Hughes's poetry depends upon the relationship between the individual and the community, he opens "Early Evening Quarrel" and "Same in Blues" to the community in the final stanzas. In "Early Evening Quarrel" the first four stanzas reveal personal interactions between Hammond and Hattie to include Hattie's asking for sugar, Hammond's gambling, and Hattie's comment on being mistreated. In the first four stanzas, the poem presents two individuals; however, the last stanza broadens the poem to include all women. It does not limit "Early Evening Quarrel" to the experience of one woman:

Lawd, these things we women  
Have to stand!  
I wonder is there nowhere a  
Do-right man? (44)

Specifically, the words "we women" open Hattie's situation to many others in the community. Thus, the first four stanzas represent a more personalized aspect of the blues, while the final stanza connects Hattie and those who identify with her to the community.

By reducing the distinctions between his characters, Hughes, in effect, establishes a single, prevailing blues voice. R. Baxter Miller says that "where Phillis Wheatley



praised George Washington, he [Langston Hughes] honors the Black Everyman and, indeed, everyperson" (48). This voice does not belong to a particular character because it expresses a multitude of experiences within the community. In this way, the blues voice in Hughes's poetry parallels the type character through which he portrays the everyperson. One example of the similarity between the voices of individual poems occurs in "Hope" and "Prayer."

#### Hope

Sometimes when I'm lonely,  
 Don't know why,  
 Keep thinkin I won't be lonely  
 By and by. (Hughes, Selected 3)

#### Prayer

I ask you this:  
 Which way to go?  
 I ask you this:  
 Which sin to bear?  
 Which crown to put  
 Upon my hair?  
 I do not know,  
 Lord God,  
 I do not know. (18)

The similarity between the blues voices in these poems occurs in the length, the word choice, and the persona. Both of these extremely short poems employ a basic vocabulary with clear and succinct word choices. Hughes's

use of the first person also creates a personal tone shared by both poems; however, the lack of detail about the individual speakers makes it difficult to distinguish between the voice of one character and the voice of the other. For all practical purposes, these two poems express a single blues voice. This similarity supports Hughes's purpose of creating a Harlem community, a priority when compared to the characterization of individual characters. In "Hope" he offers insight into loneliness, while "Prayer" addresses frustration over unknowing. Hughes extracts these experiences from his poems as distinguishing characteristics that define his type character and his Harlem community.

Langston Hughes distinguishes between the male and female experience through characters like Hattie and Hammond in "Early Evening Quarrel" or Lulu and Leonard in "Same in Blues," yet even with these distinctions, a single blues voice which is neither male nor female prevails. In an interview, Hughes says:

The men's blues are almost always about being out of work, broke, hungry, maybe a long ways from home, no ticket to get back. In other words, they're sort of economic blues. The women's blues, on the other hand, are almost always about love. Very often a woman will be singing about some man who's gone off and left her before she's ready for him to go, or something like that.

(Hughes, Poetry and Reflections)

In these comments, Hughes sets forth the criteria for the "male or female" blues poem, but stylistically the male and female use the same voice. Because of theme and the obvious indications such as names or personal pronouns, the reader distinguishes between the sexes. However, in style, tone, or reflection, no clear distinction exists. Jemie notes that in "Hughes's repertory, as in the popular blues, there is no significant difference between blues by men and those by women" (45). Stylistically, no difference in voice exists between Hughes's males and females, for the Harlem experience is neither male nor female. Gayl Jones asserts that

themes of identity and recognition are archetypal in all blues dramas. Blues pulls together and asserts identity (self and other) through clarification and playing back of experiences and meanings. (93)

In his own words, Hughes recognizes distinctions between men's blues and women's blues, and he creates male and female characters. However, the type character, by blending the individual male and female experiences, diminishes the distinctions between the two. In effect, Hughes establishes a non-gendered individual to facilitate its assimilation into the all-encompassing experience of the black folk in Harlem.

Furthermore, Hughes repeats characters, themes and specific lines to diminish the distinctions among the

individuals in his poems. These repetitions allow him to capture the distinguishing characteristics of Harlem, but at the same time, incorporate the individuals and their experiences into the comprehensive Harlem experience. The community, represented by the type character, has a single prevailing blues voice, making the individual experiences of one character more accessible to those around him. The communal voice embodies the personal experiences of the individual characters. Hughes develops this voice through a collection of blues poems which share common themes, styles, characters, and voices.

Many of Hughes's poems share common themes. Several poems focused on lost love develop personal experiences within the communal expression, allowing more individuals to enter into the community through this particular theme. "Sylvester's Dying Bed" and "As Befits a Man" share a common theme of a man who does not want to die without his women around him. In several poems, the "Daddy" reflects one of the many experiences of the Harlem community. In "As Befits a Man" the narrator says in the second stanza:

I don't mind dying  
But I want my funeral to be fine:  
A row of long tall mamas  
Fainting, fanning, and crying" (Hughes, Selected  
46).

He continues in the fourth stanza to say

When they let me down,

Down into the clay,  
 I want the women to holler:  
*Please don't take him away!*  
 OW-ooo-oo-o!  
 Don't take daddy away! (46)

Similarly, in the fourth stanza of "Sylvester's Dying Bed" the narrator relays how

Black gals was a-beggin,'  
 You can't leave us here!  
 Brown-skins cryin,' "Daddy!  
 Honey! Baby! Don't go dear!" (38)

Although seemingly different characters, the men depicted in "Sylvester's Dying Bed" and "As Befits A Man" share some similarities. In the same way, "Midwinter Blues," "Miss Blues'es Child," and "Could Be" share the blues of a lost love, while "Early Evening Quarrel" and "Hard Daddy" both present a woman who feels she is being mistreated by her man.

While the repetition of particular themes involves several poems, Hughes also repeats specific lines as a part of his blues style that becomes characteristic of many of his blues poems. For example, the lines "Fire,/ Fire, Lord!/ Fire gonna burn ma soul!" (Hughes, Selected 20) occurs four times in his seven stanza poem, "Fire." "The Weary Blues" also contains repeated lines where "He did a lazy sway. . . . / He did a lazy sway. . . ." (33). Another

example occurs in the poem "Hard Daddy" in the first four lines of the third stanza:

I wish I had wings to  
 Fly like the eagle flies.  
 Wish I had wings to  
 Fly like the eagle flies. (150)

In general, this repetition of lines attacks the distinctions between poems because stylistically it indicates a single voice throughout the entire collection.

"Midwinter Blues" provides another example:

He told me that he loved me  
 But he must a been tellin' a lie.  
 He told me that he loved me.  
 He must a been tellin' a lie. (151)

Regardless of the particular blues poem, Hughes repeats lines to establish a characteristic common to all of his blues poems. It becomes difficult to tell where the individual in one poem ends and where the individual in the next poem begins. Because this structure causes a blending among individual characters and among the poems, Hughes creates a single blues voice that, representative of the type character, embodies the distinguishing characteristics of Harlem.

Blyden Jackson comments on this aspect of the blues structure. He says

It has a three-phrase form. A statement is made:  
*When love is gone / What can a young gal do?*

Next, that statement is repeated, as likely as not with some slight variation: *When love is gone, / O, what can a young gal do?* Then all is rounded off with a final piece of comment, swift and terse and often a wry offshoot of the original statement and its variation: *Keep on a-lovin' me, daddy, / Cause I don't want to be blue.* Not all of Hughes's blues organize themselves strictly by this form, but many of them do, scrupulously, as if Hughes had either studied the form very consciously or it had become automatic with him (or both); and none depart so far from this form that they seem to flaunt its authority as an established type. (55-56)

Unfortunately, a full appreciation of the blues repetition comes only after reading several of Hughes's blues poems. Although the individual might share a specific incident or emotion, these experiences are the distinguishing characteristics of Harlem embodied by the type character.

Hughes's repeated use of dialect also blends the individual experiences into a single type character by lessening the distinctions between individual characters and poems. The dialect, a characteristic common to Hughes's Harlem and to the blues poems in Selected Poetry of Langston Hughes, labels the individual as a part of the community, and it complements Hughes's development of a single blues voice.

The following poem "Fire" exemplifies Hughes's use of dialect:

Fire,  
Fire, Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

I ain't been good,  
I ain't been clean-  
I been stinkin', low-down, mean.

Fire,  
Fire, Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

Tell me, brother,  
Do you believe  
If you wanta go to heaben  
Got to moan an' grieve?

Fire,  
Fire Lord!  
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

I been stealin',  
Been tellin' lies,  
Had more women  
Than Pharaoh had wives.



Fire,

Fire, Lord!

Fire gonna burn ma soul!

I means Fire, Lord!

Fire gonna burn ma soul! (Hughes, Selected 20)

Specifically, the use of phrases like "I ain't been good," and words like ma, wanta, an', tellin' and stealin' reveal characteristics of the folk dialect. Another example occurs in "Midwinter Blues":

Don't know's I'd mind his goin'

But he left me when the coal was low.

Don't know's I'd mind his goin'

But he left when the coal was low. (Hughes,

Selected 151)

In addition, the first two lines "Fire,/ Fire Lord!" demonstrate the tradition of the holler or the yell, reflecting the early history of the blues musical tradition (Maultsby 49). As a stylistic feature, the folk dialect permeates most of Hughes's poetry. Whether repeated uses of dialect, similar themes, or specific lines, these bluesian characteristics highlight folk experiences that are recognizable to people in Hughes's Harlem and which become the building blocks of his type character.

In Liberating Voices, Gayl Jones suggests Ann Petry's *Solo on the Drums* "provides a direction in modifying the literary text through the use of musical stereotypes and

procedures-the referents of blues and jazz" (98). This assertion applies to the poetry of Langston Hughes, for his blues poems reflect, and even conform to, the blues musical tradition. Because his blues reflect this tradition, Hughes's success might be measured by his ability to convey both the individual and communal experience in his collection of blues poems. The single prevailing blues voice of Hughes's type character creates the connection between the individual and the community. Hughes's portrayal of Harlem folk life depends on the several experiences embodied in the type character, a representation of the comprehensive Harlem experience. Through the type character, Hughes collects the experiences of his individual characters and unifies them into a community, according to both the musical and literary blues traditions. The end result is a literary Harlem that preserves both the individual and community as expressed through the type character.

### CHAPTER III

#### GLORIA NAYLOR'S INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY WITHIN THE BLUESIAN STRUCTURE OF THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

In her first novel, The Women of Brewster Place, Gloria Naylor draws upon the blues literary tradition, but her approach remains less direct than that of Langston Hughes. Nevertheless, Naylor achieves a bluesian effect by employing a structure defined by the individual and the community. Most criticism of Naylor's work focuses on the communities of Brewster Place and Linden Hills, but critics generally emphasize discrimination, racism, or the role of the black female in her community. While these analyses are valid and in many ways reflect Naylor's own comments on her work, they neglect the bluesian structure of The Women of Brewster Place and ignore the role of the blues in the development of the individual and the community. Like a blues song, the novel is built on a structure that creates unity while presenting both the individual and the community in accordance with the blues tradition.

The equation  $I_{mm} + I_{emj} + I_{kb} + I_{llt} + I_{cl} + I_l + I_t = C_{bp}$  shows the structure of the novel in terms of the personal and group dynamics of the blues tradition.<sup>1</sup> The  $I$ 's represent the stories of seven individual women as stanzas in a blues song;  $C_{bp}$  represents the community of

Brewster Place in its entirety. A formalist-structuralist approach to The Women of Brewster Place examines the structure of the novel, emphasizing the role of the individual stories and their contribution to the cohesion of the Brewster Place community.<sup>2</sup> In The Women of Brewster Place, each woman's personal story represents an individual experience, whereas collectively, the stories embody the experience of the community of Brewster Place. The blues literary tradition helps unify the individual parts into the whole. Many other elements of the blues tradition, such as personal and group dynamics, repetitions, emotions, and rhythms are embedded in the blues structure of this novel, as well. An examination of the structure as a blues song reveals much about Naylor's individuals, the Brewster Place community, and the interaction between the two.

The personal and group dynamics that influence the structure and ultimately the purpose of the blues song function similarly in The Women of Brewster Place. Helen Fiddymment Levy describes Naylor's Brewster Place as "a society whose fragmentation is indicated by the work's structure, 'a novel in seven stories'" (263). The eventual cohesion of these individual stories as a novel constitutes Naylor's basic structure. Ortiz Wilson, while exploring the history of the blues notes that in Africa "every man is considered to be an artist to the extent that every man participated to some degree in the artistic life of the community" (Wilson 13). Through the seven parts of The

Women of Brewster Place, each woman becomes an artist who contributes individual experiences that are absorbed by the community. In this way, Naylor achieves the interaction of the personal and group dynamics traditionally found in blues songs.

Barbara Christian acknowledges the connection between individual and community in Naylor's novel:

With the exception of the lesbians in "The Two". . . Naylor emphasizes the distinctiveness of each story by naming it after the specific woman on whom she is focusing, even as she might include that woman in another's story. By using this form, one that heightens the individuality of her characters so that they are not merely seen as faceless "female heads of household," while stressing their interrelationships, Naylor establishes Brewster Place as a community in spite of its history of transients--a community with its own mores, strengths, and weaknesses. (110)

The I's on the left-hand side of the equation correspond to the individual identities and stories of Naylor's seven black characters. The nature of the I's in this equation differs from that of the I's in the equation in Chapter 2 because of the heightened individuality Christian mentions. For Hughes and his type character, each I represents an experience which becomes a distinguishing characteristic of Harlem. The many experiences portrayed in Hughes's poetry

allow characters to empathize with the experiences of others in the Harlem community.

In contrast, Naylor limits the number of significant individual characters to seven females: Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Lucelia Louise Turner, Cora Lee, Lorraine, and Theresa. Each of these women offers a specific experience which preserves her individuality. Mattie Michael comes to Brewster Place when she loses her house because her son Basil skips bail. After many years of chasing a singing career, Etta Mae Johnson finds her only welcome in Brewster Place and, more specifically, in Mattie. Kiswana Browne exchanges the luxurious standard of living of her parents in Linden Hills for her home in Brewster Place to escape from the "terminal case of middle-class amnesia" (85) she sees in the successful black people of Linden Hills. Lucelia Louise Turner experiences powerful grief as she mourns the loss of her daughter amidst the stress of a dead-end relationship. Cora Lee, in her obsession with newborn babies, loses interest in the child after the smell of newness she associates with baby powder fades. She forgets, or rather tries to ignore, the other children as she wants another child, a "new baby doll" (107). Lorraine and Theresa fight the prejudice, hatred, and rejection of a heterosexual community.

Naylor's inclusion of these painful and frustrating experiences reflects a depth of emotion traditionally found in the structure of a blues song. Onwuchekwa Jemie

identifies some common blues themes as "love and its betrayal; hard luck (pennilessness); joblessness, weariness from overwork; loneliness, a longing for rest and good times; frustration; despair, restlessness and wanderlust" (42). Brewster Place embodies these themes, but they do not apply equally to each of the seven black women. Concerning the individual, LeRoi Jones writes that "[e]ach man sang a different blues: the Peatie Wheatshaw blues, the Blind Lemon blues, the Blind Willie Johnson blues, etc." (67). For Naylor as well, each woman sings the blues out of a personal and generally painful experience. Paul Oliver, in his book Blues Fell This Morning, observes,

[I]n order to understand the blues singer it is necessary to explore the background of his themes, and to try to enter the world through them, distant and unapproachable though it may seem, cruel and hard though it may be. (13)

Naylor explores such cruel and hard themes. She depicts the community's rejection of Lorraine and Theresa's lesbian relationship, Lorraine's rape, and Ciel's mourning the death of her daughter, Serena. After Serena's death, Ciel

retched yellowish-green phlegm, and she brought up white lumps of slime that hit the seat of the toilet and rolled off, splattering onto the tiles. After a while she heaved only air, but the body did not seem to want to stop. It was exorcising the evilness of pain. (Naylor 104)

In the rape scene,

[t]he sixth boy took a dirty paper bag lying on the ground and stuffed it into her mouth. She felt a weight drop on her spread body. Then she opened her eyes and they screamed and screamed into the face above hers--the face that was pushing this tearing pain inside of her body.

(170)

The specific emotions, backgrounds and experiences of her characters reaffirm the individuality of the seven women who sing the blues. Hughes's characters share experiences and emotions, but Naylor's seven women maintain a stronger distinctiveness that complicates the merging of the individuals into the community. Although interaction among characters occurs, Naylor maintains seven discrete stories and experiences even as the women become unified as a community.

As exemplified by the six separate stories, Naylor emphasizes the individual. However, Levy writes that Naylor "never accepts the ideal of the heroic individual as a model for her female protagonists" (263). While no heroes emerge, the individualism of Naylor's characters survives. Levy explains how the community promotes a personal voice. She writes:

[Naylor] considers that individual identity arises out of a group unity based on a shared oral tradition of family and neighborhood history, out



of distinctive local foods, colloquial speech, and codes of behavior. Naylor identifies the loss of the oral tradition, the mother tongue, the family interaction, as dissolving the "communal ties, familial ties, spiritual ties," the connections that shape an enduring sense of individual identity. She [Naylor] recalls that her own family, despite their poverty, gave her a sense of self which came out of their struggles and experiences in the South. (270)

Naylor's individual is necessary for blending of the personal and communal attributes found in the blues tradition. A catharsis develops out of this blending, but the individuality of the characters is not lost. Elizabeth House says Toni Morrison's characters learn to "live comfortably with others while retaining their own individuality" (28). Similarly, Naylor's women maintain distinct identities despite their merging into the community. This distinction, in some cases, reflects a detachment of one character from one or more others. For example, Naylor's heterosexual characters

leaned back, supported by the sheer weight of their numbers and confronted by the woven barrier that kept them protected from the yellow mist that enshrouded the two [Lorraine and Theresa] as they came and went on Brewster Place. (Naylor 132)

Part of this detachment stems from an independence traditionally associated with the role of the female in African-American culture. Barbara Christian explains:

Because of their origins and history, Afro-American women could lay claim to a viable tradition in which they had been strong central persons in their families and communities, not solely because of their relationship to men, but because they themselves had bonded together to ensure survival of their children, their communities, the race. (118)

Like the blues tradition, Naylor highlights the individuality of the black female while creating the community of Brewster Place at the same time.

Naylor's characterization of individual characters, although achieved through the distinct separateness of seven personal stories, does not completely isolate one woman from the experiences of the others. Barbara Christian writes,

Although each of their narratives could be called a short story, the novel consists of the interrelationships of the stories, as a pattern evolves, not only because the characters all live in Brewster Place but also because they are connected to one another. (110)

Like Hughes's characters, the seven women of Naylor's Brewster Place interact with, empathize with, and relate to others. For instance, Etta Mae returns home her first night

at Brewster Place to find Mattie playing her records, and she

stopped straining when it suddenly came to her that it wasn't important what song it was--someone was waiting up for her. Someone who would deny fiercely that there had been any concern--just a little indigestion from them fried onions that kept me from sleeping. Thought I'd pass the time by figuring out what you see in all this loose-life music.

Etta laughed softly to herself as she climbed the steps toward the light and the love and the comfort that awaited her. (Naylor 74)

In Lucelia Louise Turner's story, interaction occurs when Mattie "saw Ciel's eyes. Dear God, she thought, she's dying, and right in front of our faces" (102). Mattie physically interacts with Ciel as

[s]he sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. . . . The black mammoth gripped so firmly that the slight increase of pressure would have cracked the girl's spine. (103)

Kiswana Brown enters Cora Lee's story by inviting the children to the Shakespearean play, and she also interacts with Lorraine in the planning meeting for the block party. Sophie's response to Lorraine's lesbian relationship in the

planning meeting exemplifies a less positive interaction.

Sophie says:

'That's right! That's right' Sophie screamed.

'Pick on me! Sure, I'm the one who goes around doin' them filthy, unnatural things right under your noses. Every one of you knows it; everybody done talked about it, not just me!' Her head moved around the room like a trapped animal's.

'And any woman--any woman who defends that kind of thing just better be watched. That's all I gotta say--where there's smoke, there's fire, Etta Johnson!' (145)

Each character's experience and emotion differs from the others, increasing the distinction between each member of Naylor's Brewster Place community.

This community, (Cbp), differs from Hughes's more open and inclusive Harlem community because a wall separates it from the rest of the world. Naylor's seven stories create a Brewster Place community defined by the boundary this dead-end wall represents. Barbara Christian writes that the "shape of Brewster Place too is self-enclosed, for a wall is put up, separating it from other neighborhoods and making it a dead-end" (109). According to Levy,

No matter how diverse the women in age, talents, and experience, the wall seals them in behind barriers of racism and sexism, defines the limits

of their aspirations, and shields the rest of the city from their influence. (265)

Jacqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter, in their article "Black Feminism and Media Criticism: The Women of Brewster Place," affirm Christian's and Levy's view of the wall, for they describe how the "brick wall at the end of the block, erected as a result of political and economic machinations, separates the residents from the rest of the world" (292). The wall locks the women, their emotions, and their experiences within the boundaries of Brewster Place. Escape to the outside world becomes impossible. For relief, the women must look inwardly to Brewster Place itself. However, Brewster Place offers a cathartic release only when the community unifies as a blues song. The blues song provides a way for relief.

Although the women gather at the meeting in Kiswana's apartment, no sense of community develops. In fact, disunity prevails as Sophie verbally attacks Lorraine. This meeting reflects a different relationship among the women of Brewster Place than the one portrayed in Mattie's dream at the end of the novel. Lorraine realizes the need for community because she understands that

[b]lack people were all in the same boat--she'd come to realize this even more since they had moved to Brewster--and if they didn't row together, they would sink together. (Naylor 142)

However, at this point, one stanza ("The Two") remains unsung. Not until each individual woman contributes to the communal expression through her story can Naylor's complete blues song emerge. Brewster Place, like the blues song, allows the women to become a community through the purging of individual emotions. Brewster Place offers no solutions, but as Ralph Ellison writes, "[M]usic will not only calm, it will ennoble thee" (198). He adds:

Their [the blues'] attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self. (94)

Murray concurs, suggesting that "the blues, with no aid from existentialism, have always known that there were no clear-cut solutions for the human situation" (The Omni-Americans 167).

Just as the blues song does not solve the problems of life, neither does the community of Brewster Place who, "dying but not dead," watches its people leave (Naylor 191). James Robert Saunders quotes Kathryn Palumbo's assertion that Naylor "offers her characters no hope and no power beyond daily survival" (250). Bobo and Seiter refer to Brewster Place as "troubled" (90), while Barbara Christian calls it "flawed and vulnerable" (106). Without the realization of Brewster Place as a blues song, many look for

answers, solutions, and lasting condolences they expect the community to provide. These readers fail to see Brewster Place as anything but "the last stop on the road to the bottom in American society, where you live when you can't live anywhere else" (Christian 106). The strength of the blues song lies in the telling and in the purging. As a community, Brewster Place benefits from both.

The consummated blues song allows a catharsis marked by the destruction of the dead-end wall which holds smatterings of Lorraine's blood in Mattie's dream. The wall's destruction indicates the catharsis common to the blues tradition, and because all the women participate, it marks Naylor's strongest sense of community. Jill L. Matus notes that "[a]s the name suggests, 'The Block Party' is a vision of community effort, everyone's story" (126). Naylor demonstrates the communal effort through the image of hearts beating in unison, almost as a single heart. As the women tear down the wall, she writes:

Suddenly, the rain exploded around their feet in a fresh downpour, and the cold waters beat on the top of their heads--almost in perfect unison with the beating of their hearts. (188)

The heartbeat connects the individuals, creating a community.

After Cora leads the charge, Naylor specifically includes each woman in the destruction of the wall. For example, Cora "took the Popsicle stick and started digging

around the loose mortar near the brick . . . The fragile stick splintered so she used her fingernails, the gravelly cement lacerating her knuckles" (185). Naylor describes Mattie's ". . . digging into the crumbling mortar with her barbecue fork" (186), while "Theresa flung her umbrella away so she could have both hands free to help the other women who were now bringing her bricks" (188). As Kiswana tries to explain the difference between blood and water, "Ciel pressed the brick into Kiswana's hand and forced her fingers to curl around it. 'Does it matter? Does it really matter?'" (187).

The individuals and their stories all come together for this catharsis, and in a community effort,

Women flung themselves against the wall, chipping away at it with knives, plastic forks, spiked shoe heels, and even bare hands; the water pouring under their chins, plastering their blouses and dresses against their breasts and into the cracks of their hips. The bricks piled up behind them and were snatched and relayed out of Brewster Place past overturned tables, scattered coins, and crushed wads of dollar bills. (Naylor 186)

The bloody brick also points to the catharsis of the blues song as it "was passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table, until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue" (186). The destruction of the wall, as a catharsis, symbolizes the climax of the -



blues song. At this climax, the community finds relief and escape from the emotions and experiences that have trapped it within the borders of this dead-end wall for so long. During its destruction, the blues song plays, and the community purges itself.

John Wesley Work, in reference to folk songs, says "No, these songs cannot die. They are eternal" (99). For Naylor, the song becomes much like the dream in which both "ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die" (Naylor 192). However, as a blues song, Brewster does not die. Naylor's community survives in the minds and memories of the characters. In the final section, "Dusk," Naylor preserves the spirit of the Brewster Place community even though some individuals find themselves in "the arms of a world that they would have to pry open to take them, most to inherit another aging street and the privilege of clinging to its decay" (191). As long as Brewster Place lives, its power as a blues song allows the former inhabitants to endure. According to the tradition, the blues "is a music of this earth and of all its paradoxes, where both its joys and pains are synthesized and resolved into an emotional-spiritual unity that helps make possible life's continuance" (Wilson 29). Naylor writes "So when Brewster dies, it will die alone" (191). As long as people live at Brewster Place, the individual, the community, and the blues song will exist. If the people go,

the need for a blues song also goes. Consequently, when Brewster Place dies, it dies alone.

The formalist-structuralist approach to the blues structure in Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place analyzes the individual stories and their integration into the novel.<sup>2</sup> The Women of Brewster Place does not reflect all traditional characteristics of the blues, such as the call-and-response, the dialect, or the cry and holler; however, bluesian elements such as rhythm, emotion, and repetition, when combined with the personal and group dynamics, suggest the structure of a blues song in Naylor's novel.

E.M. Forster, in his book Aspects of the Novel, writes of rhythm, a characteristic of Naylor's work associated with the formalist-structuralist approach. Forster defines a novel's rhythm in terms of music, specifically Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. He notes the unity of Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past when he writes, the "book is chaotic, ill constructed, it has and will have no external shape; and yet it hangs together because it is stitched internally, because it contains rhythms" (236). Structure creates rhythm, and that same rhythm, in turn, unifies the structure. Forster states:

[M]usic, though it does not employ human beings, though it is governed by intricate laws, nevertheless does offer in its final expression a type of beauty which fiction might achieve in its own way. Expansion. That is the idea the

novelist must cling to. Not completion. Not rounding off but opening out. When the symphony is over we feel that the notes and tunes composing it have been liberated, they have found in the rhythm of the whole their individual freedom.

(241-242)

For Naylor, this rhythm exists within the individual stories as well as within the structure of the novel as a whole. If Brewster Place is viewed as a blues song and the individual stories as stanzas, Naylor achieves a bluesian effect that generally derives from rhythm.

Although discussed earlier in relation to the individual and community, emotion also contributes to the rhythm of Naylor's novel. The first aspect of the relationship between bluesian rhythm and emotion emerges from the style of particular passages within the individual stories. For example, Naylor writes:

Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time . . . She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her heart, and they found it--a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled--and the splinter gave way, but its roots

were deep, gigantic, ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied.

It would heal. (103-104)

The linguistic form as well as the emotion it embodies works to create a rhythmic flow characteristic of a blues song. Naylor's imagery suggests deep emotion, particularly the rocking that takes Ciel back through her life's experiences and then the splinter whose "roots were deep, gigantic, ragged" (103-104). The splinter and then the pus represent an infection of Ciel's emotions. Naylor's style, to include imagery, creates rhythm which also supports the portrayal of emotion. For instance, the alliteration with the words *slight, sliver, splinter, surface, skin* makes a smooth flow. Another example involves Mattie Michael as

she lay down with her son and sank into a timeless sleep. Time's passage through the memory is like molten glass that can be opaque or crystallize at any given moment at will: a thousand days are melted into one conversation, one glance, one hurt, and one hurt can be shattered and sprinkled over a thousand days. It is silent and elusive, refusing to be dammed and dripped out day by day; it swirls through the mind while an entire lifetime can ride like foam on the deceptive, transparent waves and get sprayed onto the

consciousness at ragged, unexpected intervals.

(Naylor 35)

Again, alliteration adds to the rhythm with *dammed*, *dripped*, and *day by day*. In this segment, her language creates a strong image when she writes "an entire lifetime can ride like foam on the deceptive, transparent waves and get sprayed onto the consciousness at ragged, unexpected intervals" (35). Her imagery contributes to both the emotion and the sense of movement in these two passages. First, the idea of rocking and of being propelled indicates a movement. Ciel moves from her bed, out of the room, into a blue vastness, into her childhood, into the womb, and then into the nadir of the heart. These movements are not abrupt, but rather, Naylor softly and unnoticeably makes the transaction. The movement creates a pattern; it creates a rhythm.

In the second passage, Naylor achieves the same effect, although she uses time to create movement. Mattie Michael starts in a timeless sleep, and the next line, referring to "time's passage," relates time to Naylor's character. She is subject to time. The phrase, "a thousand days are melted into one conversation, one glance, one hurt, and one hurt can be shattered and pulled over a thousand days" (35) uses the move from one thousand to one and then from one back to one thousand to create the flow. Mattie has a starting point (one thousand) and an end point (one), but Naylor takes her back to the origination (one thousand). In

addition, Naylor's uses of metaphor and simile relating time to water create a rhythm exemplified by the flow and movement of water. She employs words such as *swirls*, *ride*, *waves*, and *sprayed* to emphasize the movement. Through these devices, alliteration, assonance, word choice, imagery, simile, and metaphor, Naylor uses individual segments of her six stories to create rhythm in order to convey the deep emotion embedded within her lines.

The structure of Naylor's individual stories also reflects this relationship between emotion and rhythm. The ebb and flow of the blues starts at Brewster Place, marking the beginning of each story as well as an emotional calmness. The emotion intensifies as Naylor exposes each character's deepest pains. This high emotion allows a catharsis signifying the climax of the individual's story, and when related to the blues, this climax reflects an excited emotional state. Finally, this expression and purging of emotion bring the story back to Brewster Place where again, an emotional calmness exists. Each individual experiences calmness, excitement, and calmness again. The blues structure follows this same pattern of the low-high-low emotion which Ortiz Wilson explains as

the gradual building up of tension through repetition and intensity of musical phrases leading to cathartic emotional and physical states expressed through dance, vocal, and motor responses, followed by states of relaxation. (28)

For Mattie Michael, the "rattling moving van crept up Brewster like a huge green slug" and she realized she "would have to die here on this crowded street because there just wasn't enough life left for her to do it all again" (7).

From Brewster Place, Mattie's story regresses to "Sugar cane and summer and Papa and Basil and Butch. And the beginning--the beginning of her long, winding journey to Brewster"

(8). During this section, although interspersed with bursts of emotion such as Basil's rat bite, the story reaches an emotional climax when Basil skips bail, and Mattie loses her house. The loss of both her son and her house characterize Mattie's pain that eventually brings her story back to Brewster Place. At the end,

Mattie grasped the cold metal key in one hand and put the other on the iron railing and climbed the stoop to the front entrance. As she opened the door and entered the dingy hallway, a snowflake caught in her collar, melted, and rolled down her back like a frozen tear. (54)

Mattie returns to Brewster Place, and the following story of Etta Mae Johnson starts where Mattie's finishes. The same characteristic applies to most of the stories. In Ciel's case, the first sentence reflects her presence in Brewster Place where the "sunlight was still watery as Ben trudged into Brewster Place, and the street had just begun to yawn and stretch itself" (89). While this story begins with Brewster Place, the preceding story of Kiswana Browne ends

there. Kiswana "suddenly changed her mind and sat down in the chair with a long sigh that caught in the upward draft of the autumn wind and disappeared over the top of the building" (88). For Kiswana, this building signifies Brewster Place as contrasted to her parents' home in Linden Hills.

Following the beginning at Brewster Place, Ciel's story reveals intense emotion caused by both an abortion and the death of her daughter. At the height of this emotion; however, a catharsis occurs when "Ciel began to cry--there, naked, in the center of the bathroom floor. . . And Ciel sat. And cried. . . And Ciel lay down and cried. But Mattie knew the tears would end" (105). The last line, "And she would sleep. And morning would come" (105) refers to Brewster Place, for when she awakes, she will be in Brewster Place. This new morning brings an emotional calm achieved through Ciel's catharsis the previous night.

As a final demonstration of this point, "The Two" also maintains the ebb and flow of emotion that creates rhythm. Again, this story begins on Brewster Place when Naylor writes, "At first they seemed like such nice girls. No one could remember exactly when they had moved into Brewster" (129). The emotional climax begins when Theresa throws the ingredients for her meat loaf at Sophie. She says, "'Now here's something *freaky* for you--olives. I put olives in my meat loaf! So run up and down and tell that!'" (158). The climax consummates with the rape of Lorraine where



the cells went that contained her powers of taste and smell. The last that were screamed to death were those that supplied her with the ability to love--or hate. . . Lorraine lay in that alley only screaming at the moving inside of her that refused to come to rest. (171)

For Lorraine, the catharsis follows the emotional intensification when she unconsciously murders Ben, for "she brought the brick down again, splitting his forehead and crushing his temple, rendering his brains just a bit more useful than hers were now" (173). In this story, the emotional calm occurs in the following section, "The Block Party," where, because of the rain,

Brewster Place wasn't able to congregate around the wall and keep up a requiem of the whys and hows of his dying. . . They were confined to their homes and their own thoughts as it became increasingly difficult to tell a night sky from a day sky behind the smoky black clouds. (175)

Although the emotional response to the rape and murder still lingers, Naylor brings "The Two" to completion amidst an emotional calm in the first lines of "The Block Party." As the quotation above suggests, she brings the conclusion of "The Two" back to Brewster Place.

The stories reflect this pattern of calm-excitement-calm emotion that ends and begins with Brewster Place. Although few exceptions exist, the repetition of this

structure in the individual stories contributes to the overall structure and rhythm of Naylor's novel. Gayl Jones, writing on The Third Life of Grange Copeland, combines the formalist-structuralist approach and Forster's idea of rhythm when she says,

blues repetitions exist on the multilevels of narrative, dialogue, word choice and the overall rhythm and pace of the work, its plot structure, complication and resolutions of relationships.

(155)

These repetitions allow a continuity among the stories that reflects the smoothness and musical quality of a blues song. Through this repetition, Naylor continues to melt the individual stories into the community of the novel. This pattern, repeated seven times, creates the sense of rhythm Forster identifies in Aspects of the Novel. His comments on rhythm apply to Naylor's depiction of emotion; he writes:

[t]here are times when it [rhythm] means nothing and is forgotten, and this seems to me the function of rhythm in fiction; not to be there all the time like a pattern, but by its lovely waxing and waning to fill us with surprise and freshness and hope. (239)

Although the rhythm creates a flow, Naylor does not limit emotional intensity to the climax. Throughout the individual stories, she includes powerful expressions of emotion that exemplify the waxing and waning pattern that

Forster describes. The relationship between unpredictable emotions and rhythm fosters the spontaneity of a blues song. For Etta Mae Johnson,

*It wasn't the music or the words or the woman that took that room by its throat until it gasped for air--it was the pain. There was a young southern girl, Etta Johnson, pushed up in a corner table, and she never forgot. The music, the woman, the words* (Naylor 55)

The emotional outbursts of the seven individual women come and go throughout the novel, but Naylor presents these emotions in a way that mimics the underlying rhythm of a spontaneous blues song.

The repetition of phrases, indicative of the traditional blues structure, also creates a sense of rhythm. For instance, Mattie Michael figures

*She had her week's pay; she could go to a hotel. She could buy a one-way ticket home. Tomorrow was Sunday; she could look again. She could go home. If she found nothing Sunday, she could try again Monday. She could go home. If nothing Monday, she must show at work for Tuesday. Who would keep the baby? She could go home. Home. Home.* (30)

Cora Lee offers another example:

*[S]he just didn't understand them. Don't understand you, Cora Lee, just don't understand you. Having all them babies year after year by*

*God knows who. Only Sammy and Maybelline got the  
same father. Daughter, what's wrong with you?  
Sis, what's wrong with you? Case number 6348,  
what's wrong with you? (113)*

The rhythm she creates through the bluesian characteristic of repetition in her text also applies to her use of particular blues verses. Two examples are found in "Etta Mae Johnson" and "The Two." In the case of Etta Mae, she sings,

*I love my man  
I'm a lie if I say I don't  
I love my man  
I'm a lie if I say I don't  
But I'll quit my man  
I'm a lie if I say I won't (55)*

In another example, Etta Mae and Mattie enjoy the following verses:

*Them that's got, shall get  
Them that's not, shall lose  
So the Bible says  
And it still is news*

*Mama may have  
Papa may have  
But God bless the child  
That's got his own  
That's got his own (59)*

When Etta Mae visits Mattie's church, the gospel choir reflects the tradition of the spiritual, singing "Go Down, Moses":

When Israel was in Egypt's land  
 Let my people go  
 Oppresses so hard, they could not stand  
 Let my people go (63)

At this point, Naylor takes the opportunity to insert a comment that essentially articulates her purpose for the blues theme and structure throughout her novel. Of the spirituals, she writes:

The words were as ancient as the origin of their misery, but the tempo had picked up threefold in its evolution from the cotton fields. They were now sung with the frantic determination of a people who realized that the world was swiftly changing but for some mystic, complex reason their burden had not. (63)

Likewise, Ben's burden remains constant, but he gets drunk to avoid the reality of his pain. During "The Two," however, the blues catch him in a state of sobriety, forcing him not only to sing the blues but to feel them in his brain and heart. Ben feels the song

*Swing low, sweet chariot.* The song had started-- the whistling had begun.

It started low, from the end of his gut, and shrilled its way up into his ears and shattered

the bells, sending glass shards flying into a heart that should have been so scarred from old piercings that there was no flesh left to bleed. But the glass splinters found some minute, untouched place--as they always did--and tore the heart and let the whistling in. And now Ben would have to drink faster and longer, because the melody would now ride on his body's blood like a cancer and poison everywhere it touched. *Swing low, sweet chariot*. It mustn't get to his brain. He had a few more seconds before it got to his brain and killed him. He had to be drunk before the poison crept up his neck muscles, past his mouth, on the way to his brain. If he was drunk, then he could let it out--sing it out into the air before it touched his brain, caused him to remember. *Swing low, sweet chariot*. (149-150).

After drinking some more alcohol, Ben "sang on--drooling and humming--because to sing was salvation, to sing was to empty the tune from his blood, to sing was to unremember Elvira . . ." (150). These verses and the descriptions associated convey Naylor's personal definition of the blues. In addition, they add a bluesian tone and suggest a pattern for her overall structure of the novel. With several individuals (I) singing the blues, the community (Cbp) will sing them too.

The omniscient voice of Brewster Place found in the "Dawn" and "Dusk" sections of the novel demonstrates another aspect of Naylor's structure which depicts the individual and community in light of the blues structure. Paul Oliver says, "Blues is all these things and all these people, the creation of renowned, widely-recorded artists and the inspiration of a man known only to his community, perhaps only to himself" (6). As Oliver suggests, a difficulty arises when one tries to assign a particular or concrete parameter to the blues because they reflect the spontaneous and unpredictable human emotion. Thomas F. Marvin argues that "the blues is a supernatural force that can take on human characteristics and possess its victims" (423). The voice in these two sections, "Dawn" and "Dusk" reveals an omniscience that transcends the six personal stories. The formal style indicates a wisdom that adds credibility to the voice as well as an element of distance, as if the narration comes from one who remains outside the influence of Brewster Place and unrestrained by the passing of time. The last lines of "Dawn" demonstrate this point:

They were hard-edged, soft-centered, brutally demanding, and easily pleased, these women of Brewster Place. They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story. (Naylor 5)

This omniscient, bluesian voice frames the novel and first establishes the blues singer whose presence remains in the background of each of the later six stories or stanzas. According to the blues tradition, blues singers frequently addressed "the Blues" or "Mr. Blues" directly. Marvin quotes Michael Taft's "Blues Lyric Poetry: A Concordance" which asserts that "[t]hese songs, and many others, create an image of the blues as an active character with human traits. In one example, the blues are often described as 'walking like a man'" (Marvin 312-413). In the novel Jazz by Toni Morrison, music also functions as narrator. Paula Gallant Eckard notes:

Though unnamed, jazz is the essential narrator of the novel. It takes on shifting and ambiguous qualities as it speaks about itself, the City, and the people. The narrator speaks in a most human voice but has no human form. It even declares, "I haven't got any muscle" (8). With an omniscient, blues-like knowing, the narrator speaks about the human dramas played out in the City. It possesses a keen awareness of the thoughts, feelings and actions of the principal characters, particularly Violet and Joe Trace. (13)

In these two sections, "Dusk" and "Dawn," Naylor personifies the blues voice as a blues performer who sings throughout the novel. This voice transcends the individual, and in a detached and distant manner, it speaks for the community.



A Handbook to Literature asserts that "[i]n fiction, the *structure* is generally regarded today as the most reliable as well as the most revealing key to the meaning of the work" (Holman 459). The bluesian structure in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place attracts little notice from the critics, and yet its presence plays an important role in defining individual and community and in examining the interaction between the two. Naylor follows the blues tradition, making certain to preserve both the individual and the community, and the result is a novel that represents the singing of a blues song. Through the group and personal dynamics, individual stories, rhythms, emotions, and repetitions, Naylor brings her novel into the blues tradition. In doing so, she achieves all that the blues encompass--a storyteller, an individual, a community, an emotion, a catharsis, a dream, a smile, a history, a relief, and a way to continue. However, the blues do not stop here and neither does Naylor's novel. Through the blues structure, she captures the magic of the blues, allowing her to create individuals and a community that survive long after the blues singers stop singing. Like the blues songs, the structure in The Women of Brewster Place preserves both the individual and the community.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Each I, annotated by one, two, or three letters, represents one of major characters. Keeping the same order presented by Naylor, Imm, Iemj, Ikb, Illt, Icl, Il, and It represent the following characters respectively: Mattie Michael, Etta Mae Johnson, Kiswana Browne, Lucelia Louise Turner, Cora Lee, Lorraine, and Theresa.

<sup>2</sup> The consideration of structure in this chapter involves the formalist-structuralist approach to literary criticism. A Handbook to Literature defines formalism as a "criticism that emphasizes the form of the artwork, with 'form' variously construed to mean generic form, type, verbal form, grammatical and syntactical form, rhetorical form or verse form" (Holman 203). A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature mentions that "Aristotle's Poetics recommends an 'orderly arrangement of parts' that form a beautiful whole or organism" (Guerin 72). The formalist analyzes the form of a specific work in an attempt to identify the individual parts that, when combined, create the whole. In general, the

heart of the matter for the formalist critic is quite simple: What is the literary work, what are its *shape* and *effect*, and *how* are these achieved? All relevant answers to these questions ought to come from the text itself. (70)

Structuralists differ from formalists based on their concern for a work as it relates to a prevailing literary tradition. However, the structuralist does not disregard the individual text. Secondly, the structuralist's primary concern centers on the structure of the entire work.

Charles E. Bressler, in Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice comments on a group of structuralists who "illustrate how a story's meaning develops from its overall structure, its langue, rather than from each individual story's isolated theme" (64). Another aspect of this critical approach offered by Bressler says, "No matter what its methodology, structuralism emphasizes form and structure, not actual content of a text. Although individual texts must be analyzed, structuralists are more interested in the rule-governed system that underlies texts rather than in the texts themselves. *How* texts mean, not *what* texts mean, is their chief interest" (66).

#### CHAPTER IV

##### THE BLACK AND WHITE BLUES: BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL'S INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY IN YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE

The individual and the community in Bebe Moore Campbell's Your Blues Ain't Like Mine parallel the personal and group dynamics of the blues musical tradition. In her novel she differentiates between the blues of blacks and the blues of whites, and this differentiation reflects her portrayal of the individual and the community. Bebe Moore Campbell's individuals and communities mirror a racially segregated blues. In an article entitled "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry," Sherley A. Williams relates, through her explanation of ethnopoetics, the impact "interfaces or confrontations between different cultures" can have on the form, theme, and structure of new poetry (123). While Campbell uses the blues to separate her individuals and communities by race, the murder of Armstrong Todd forces an interface between her black and white characters. Through this confrontation, Campbell reinforces the distinction between the blues of blacks and the blues of whites, prohibiting reconciliation between blacks and whites on a communal level. August Wilson, in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, writes

Whitefolks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life. (82-83)

While her concept of the blues may apply more realistically to Your Blues Ain't Like Mine than to a contemporary music world with both black and white blues singers, when Campbell says "your blues ain't like mine," she speaks as a black woman to a white audience. Her distinction between the blues of blacks and the blues of whites shapes her depiction of both the individual and the community.

The presence of the individual and community in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine relates to the blues musical tradition. Concerning the individual, LeRoi Jones in Blues People writes that "the blues still went back for its impetus and emotional meaning to the individual, to his completely personal life and death" (67). Paul Oliver also writes in Blues Fell This Morning that "[b]lues is above all the expression of the individual Negro" (298). According to the musical tradition, the blues simultaneously portray an individual and a communal expression. The personal blues melt into the blues of the community where the individual character experiences "the processes of communal creation and participation in a shared culture" (Oakley 50). The individual blues are brought into the communal expression

for a temporary relief from personal heartache or pain (Levine 33). This interaction between the individual and community marks the cathartic value of the blues. For Campbell, however, the racial barrier between her white characters and black characters restricts the individual's absorption into the community. In Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, the black individuals are absorbed by the black community, while the white individuals are absorbed by the white community. Therefore, the racial division dictates Campbell's delineation of the individual and community in her blues and in her novel.

The equation  $I_b + I_w = C_b + C_w$  denotes the relationship between the individual and community in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine. In the equation,  $I_b$  represents the individual black characters,  $I_w$  represents the individual white characters,  $C_b$  represents the black community, and  $C_w$  represents the white community. The black and white denotations in the equation demonstrate the racial division between the individual characters and the community. Campbell uses the blues to connect the racial division to the individual and the community. She applies the blues in two ways. First, she uses the ability or inability to sing the blues to differentiate between the black and white characters: only her black characters can sing the blues. Secondly, the blues that develop from the death of Armstrong Todd exemplify the differences between the blues of her black and white characters. By these two criteria, Campbell

emphasizes the racial division between her individual characters and between her black and white communities.

To reinforce the distinction between her black blues and white blues, Campbell includes the perceptions of both the black and white characters concerning the racial environment in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine. Primarily, Campbell's individual black perspective centers on a reaction to racism. Campbell's more recent novel Brothers and Sisters also focuses on the perspectives and realizations of black characters. Similarly, Berndt Ostendorf, in Black Literature in White America believes "[b]lack poets, musicians, and politicians . . . realize that as long as whites set the norms for their behavior, in politics or in culture, they will continue to be dependents" (165). In Brothers and Sisters, Campbell explores this idea through a conversation between Esther, a black woman, and her white co-worker Mallory. Esther says:

You have the privilege that your skin gives you. You don't think of your color as an issue, because it's not. Sales clerks don't chase you around Saks Fifth Avenue trying to figure out what you stole because you are white. And the saleslady doesn't give a damn if you just got off the boat from Bosnia. It doesn't make any difference if you're French or English or Irish. You're white, and white people have the power in this country. (Campbell 344)

Esther finally realizes "what she had learned so many years ago: It was their [the whites] world; they just let her live in it. And they could decide to kick her out anytime they chose" (524). Marguerite, the black girlfriend of Clayton Pinochet, also expresses this sentiment in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine:

[She] wished there were a war, so he [Elvis Presley] could get blown to bits. There were boys in her own church who could sing tens times better than Elvis Presley, but they'd never get to be on television. They wouldn't get to be nothing.

(Campbell 168)

Ostendorf writes that many blacks, like Marguerite, resent the fact that some avenues of upward mobility "are blocked by young whites who have so many more chances in life than they ever had" (151). Campbell captures the frustration and anger of her black characters towards a racist white community. As a result, the gap between the individual black perspective (Ib) and the individual white perspective (Iw) widens.

Likewise, the perceptions of Campbell's white characters separate the individuals according to race (Ib or Iw). The white characters fail to perceive the black characters as human. In the first example, Campbell writes about Clayton Pinochet, the son of the prominent, white town leader, Stonewall Pinochet:



In all his imaginings, he had never envisioned her crying. He knew her son had died, but he'd never expected that her pain might be anything he could recognize, almost as though he believed that Negroes had their own special kind of grieving ritual, another language, something other than tears they used to express their sadness.

(Campbell, Your Blues 102)

In contrast to Clayton Pinochet, Lily Cox represents the lower class white society; however, she shares his realization:

[T]he discovery that colored people had dreams of a better life was the most profound and shocking of Lily's life, and so frightening that every time she saw the girl afterward she felt a fear and anger she couldn't explain or control, and at the same time she was overcome with confusion and helplessness. (31-32)

These examples reveal Clayton Pinochet's and Lily Cox's inability to understand the black characters as humans who have thoughts and emotions similar to whites. This racism stems from an ignorance on the part of Campbell's white characters. However, Campbell also depicts a racism motivated by hate and racial prejudice. For example, Lily Cox

never conceived of Negroes as having any kind of power that could affect her. Now she was

overwhelmed by the realization that the niggers not only could but were going to destroy her family without so much as raising their voices. Lily began to hate colored people with a simmering bitterness she had never known she possessed.

(125)

In another instance, Lily

almost put her hands on the girl, almost asked her how she got to be like that, to think like that, but she stopped herself when she realized that she was standing there envying a colored person. (32)

Racism widens the racial gap, precluding an integration of blacks and whites on either the individual or communal level. By maintaining the separation of blacks and whites through racism, Campbell indirectly creates a corresponding division between the black blues and the white blues.

The ability to sing the blues sets Campbell's black characters apart from her white characters, for only her black characters sing the blues. In Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes, David Littlejohn suggests that "the occasion and the substance of most Negro writing in America is still the undeclared race war in which all Americans are by definition, involved" (4). Through the question of who can sing the blues, Campbell sparks racial tension. Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his book Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry, writes that one need not be black to appreciate the blues, "but the

response to hardship or disappointment which takes the specific form of blues is, [Langston] Hughes recognizes, a uniquely Afro-American one" (39). Amiri Baraka, in his article "Blues, Poetry, and the New Music" says directly "Blues is African-American" (262). Langston Hughes offers a more liberal view concerning the blues of blacks and whites when he writes

. . . for the Blues have something that goes beyond race or sectional limits, that appeals to the ear and heart of people everywhere--otherwise, how could it be that in a Tokyo restaurant one night I heard a Louis Armstrong record of the St. Louis blues played over and over for a crowd of Japanese diners there? You don't have to understand the words to know the meaning of the blues, or to feel their sadness, or to hope their hopes . . . (Hughes, *Songs Called Blues* 161)

Hughes "envision[s] a more inclusive notion of America" by opening the blues to both blacks and whites (Plum 566).

Jay Plum writes:

[f]or white audiences, the blues may have expressed experiences shared by European immigrants; or for very different reasons, the blues may have appealed to a white fascination with so-called black primitivism. (566)

Plum's observation concerning the blues suggests a closing of the gap between the blues of the blacks and the blues of

the whites; however, in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, Campbell disagrees. More aligned with Baraka, Bernard W. Bell, in his book The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, comes closer to articulating Campbell's sense of black and white blues than either Hughes or Plum, for he writes,

When performed for nonmembers of the ethnic group or for those with little or no intimacy with the music, it is generally considered mere entertainment; but when performed among black Americans, especially members of the working class, it is a social ritual: a ceremonial, residual oral form whose recurring performance reinforces a sense of order in life and preserves the shared wisdom of the group. (26)

Bell distinguishes between a black and white perspective on the blues but not to the extent Campbell does in Your Blues Ain't Like Mine.

In the introduction to his book Blues Fell This Morning, Paul Oliver writes that "only the American Negro, whether purple-black or so light skinned as to be indistinguishable from his sun-tanned White Neighbour, can sing the blues" (5). Campbell presents her perspective on the black and white blues through dialog between black characters in a bar where the light-skinned man says, "White people don't sing the blues, 'cause they ain't got no blues" (Campbell, Your Blues 314). In this same segment of dialog, Campbell's characters repeat the phrase "White people ain't

got no blues" three times (314-315). Campbell's black characters both experience and sing the blues; however, the accessibility to the blues, with respect to her white characters, is more limited. Oliver writes,

[for] those who have the blues, for those who live the blues, for those who live with the blues, the blues has meaning. But for those who live outside the blues the meaning of the blues is elusive.

(Blues Fell 304)

Campbell's white characters cannot sing the blues. For the whites, the blues are tangible but very much out of reach.

Because Lily Cox cannot sing the blues, she thinks,

*If they [the black people] would only sing now, just this one time, to soothe me.* Her only answer was the wind whispering through the grass. For all her straining, she couldn't remember the words to any of the songs. (Campbell, Your Blues 328)

Lily desires the catharsis provided by the blues, but she cannot generate song from within herself. She relies on the music of the black people. Her inability to sing the blues characterizes Campbell's white characters, increasing their separation from the black characters. In another instance,

[t]he craving swept over her suddenly, as strong and burning as lust. She wanted to hear the sharecroppers singing. She hurled her cigarette into the mud, then stared forlornly at the empty Pinochet fields. Why couldn't they always be

there, she wondered, singing the background music for her life? (70)

Lily needs the black people only because she cannot sing or express her own blues. Selfishly, the "thought that the music, her music, had been transported, dispersed among the Yankees, silenced Lily" (233). She feels a sense of ownership towards the blues, thinking they should be sung by the blacks in accordance with her need.

Campbell's white characters experience the blues as emotion but they lack the ability to sing the blues and express that emotion. Her title, Your Blues Ain't Like Mine, suggests a comparison between the blues of black and white people. By separating the two races, the title indicates the difference between the blues of a black person and the blues of a white person. Throughout the work, Campbell distinguishes between having the blues and singing them. In The Negro Novel in America, Robert Bone argues that the blues allow "emotional freedom" (135). Campbell's black and white characters both express emotion, but only the black characters, through the singing of the blues, achieve an emotional freedom through a blues expression. For Wydell, "when the old man was singing, it was as though his hurt entered Wydell, because how else could he explain the blues inside him, how else could he interpret his sudden tears?" (Campbell, Your Blues 278). Campbell depicts the bluesian emotion as "a mourning that was deep and profound" (278). Later,

the blind man was still singing his blues, and the music made Wydell emotional in a way he couldn't control. One minute he felt morose and bitter, and the next he was so wildly happy that he started dancing alone in the middle of the floor.

(279)

In this novel, the black characters experience the blues as emotion, and by singing the blues, they release and express their feelings.

Campbell's black characters question whether the emotions of white people qualify as the blues when the light-skinned man at the bar says,

Everybody gets sad: But the blues is deeper than sadness. See, I know 'cause I am a blues man from way back. I know what's authentic. The blues is something in your soul telling you they ain't no hope, s--t ain't never gon' be right. You know what I mean?" (Campbell, Your Blues 315).

He concludes by saying, "White people ain't got no blues" (315). Nevertheless, while Campbell's white characters cannot sing the blues, they experience the blues as emotion. For example,

Lily moved as though she had been wounded; for weeks, she couldn't walk without holding on the things around her: the wall, chairs, the sofa. She started sentences and didn't finish them. Began cooking and left the pots to burn on the

stove. Her mind opened up, as if a bolt that had kept it shut for years became unscrewed. She cried some every day, in such protracted spells of weeping that by nighttime she was completely worn out. (232)

This description of Lily Cox captures the deeply felt emotion of a blues song. Similarly, Campbell reveals Clayton Pinochet as a white character with the blues when she writes, ". . . as if feeling sorry for colored people was just an excuse to talk about his personal blues" (28). He also feels the blues but cannot sing them.

Another example of Lily's blues occurs when she is unable to express her emotions to her husband. She suppresses them, and "by the time he [Floyd] did look, her eyes and mouth were tranquil, her feelings hidden in a place that would take him years to find" (142). Lily Cox suffers emotionally, with no outlet through the blues. Campbell's presentation of blues as emotion follows Giles Oakley's statement that "[w]hen asked to define the blues, most blues singers reply 'the blues is feeling'" (50). Although her white characters feel the blues, they cannot sing them because they lack the black experience embodied in the blues song (Oliver, Blues Fell 71).

In the equation  $I_b + I_w = C_b + C_w$ , the division between  $I_b$  and  $I_w$  directly affects the community, represented by  $C_b + C_w$ . In the welfare office, Lily desires to speak to her black friend Ida, but she "didn't want to see the hatred in



Ida's eyes. At the same time, she wanted to embrace her friend, to reclaim her" (Campbell, Your Blues 124).

However, Lily walks away, unable to transcend the racial barrier. Clayton Pinochet also struggles with a desire to reconcile blacks and whites. Campbell writes

Of course, as usual, he remained silent. He could make a telephone call in the dark; couldn't make a public statement. . . . There were some battles he just couldn't fight, at least not yet. One day he would speak out. One day he would save black people, lead them out of their misery. But not today. (78)

Although both Lily and Clayton express the desire to interact with black people on an individual level, neither character does. As a result, the gap between black and white individuals (Ib and Iw) continues to widen.

The racial division on the communal level directly reflects the racial division on the individual level. Without interaction and integration between individuals, the community cannot unify, as the separation between Cb and Cw indicates. The community clearly divides along racial lines. Campbell writes, the "idea that whites, even poor white trash, be punished for crimes against colored people was unheard of among the esteemed planters in that room" (89). The sentiment behind these lines highlights the racist ideology of the white community in Campbell's novel.

Each white individual aligns with the general consensus of the white community. Doreen tells her mother, Lily Cox,

I was raised around here, and even though I went to school with them, I always felt like they was different from white people, like I was better than they were. Hell, I was raised on that feeling, and I'll probably take it to my grave. .

. . (290)

Another example of Hopewell's racist community values occurs when Clayton Pinochet takes Sweetbabe to Dr. Mitchell's office after a wild dog bites the young black boy. The white doctor, "a spare unsmiling man wearing glasses, peered at them silently for a moment, before raising a finger toward Ida, who was crying and trembling" (133). He says to her, "You. Go around the back door" (133). Although Ida and Dr. Mitchell are individual characters, this scene calls attention to the community's racist ideologies, customs, and traditions. Dr. Mitchell sends Ida to the back door to make sure she does not "forget her place" in Hopewell's racially mixed population. As long as the white individuals cling to the traditions of a racist society, no hope for a truly integrated community exists. While Hughes and Naylor bring their individuals into a single community, Campbell portrays very little cohesion between white and black characters on either level, individual or communal. Consequently, Ib and Iw and Cb and Cw remain separated by race in the equation.

The murder of Armstrong Todd forces an interface but not a cohesion between blacks and whites. The interaction among Lily Cox, Floyd Cox, and Armstrong Todd represents a specific racial confrontation and revolves around the myth of the Southern female in which the "fragile, sweet-faced white girl or woman is pictured as the essence of victimization" (Harris 26). Trudier Harris asserts,

She is beauty; he is beast. She is to be protected; he is what she needs protection from. Her existence must be continued; he is expendable. She is the bearer of the best of her race's traditions; he bears nothing worthy of respect. She inspires confidence; he inspires fear. She is pedestalyzed; he is trampled beneath the feet of those who have created her pedestal. She can control his life by mere whim; he has little control over his life as far as she is concerned. She is innocence; he is guilt. (26)

Harris's assertion applies to Floyd Cox and the attitudes of the Southern men in Campbell's novel. For instance, after the murder of Armstrong Todd, one white character says,

Yeah. Nigger was still alive when his grandma got to him; he told her. It don't mean nothing; in a couple of days it'll be like it ain't never happened. Ain't a man around here wouldn't have done the same thing. (Campbell, Your Blues 53)

Lily Cox, against the instructions of her husband, enters the pool hall and happens upon Armstrong Todd who, unaware of her presence, speaks some French phrases he learned from his father. Floyd Cox, her husband, inaccurately recounts the pool hall incident to John Earl and Lester saying, "Some nigger said something funny to Lily. French. Vouilly vouilly dance. Something like that" (29). This interaction between Campbell's white and black characters results in the race-related murder of Armstrong Todd.

Although in different ways, the death of Armstrong Todd affects both black and white characters. Regarding Hopewell's black population Campbell writes, "In subtle ways the death of Armstrong Todd began to change them" (122). Moreover, "[e]ven the whites were shaken by the trembling earth beneath their feet" (123). Neither the black nor the white characters can escape the impact of Todd's murder. The murder creates a ripple that affects all the characters in the novel. Through this common situation, Campbell suggests a possible reconciliation between the racially separated communities. Campbell offers glimpses that point toward a closing of the gap between Cb and Cw. For instance, white children become conscious of the equality issue asking "Mama, is niggers as good as us?" (123), and the white employers begin to ask their maids, "Do you think I treat you fair?" (123). In another example,

Several of the well-to-do ladies from the  
Confederacy allowed themselves to consider that

Armstrong Todd's death was awful and perhaps uncalled for, although they didn't utter these sentiments aloud, and certainly not to their husbands. They were both moved by the depth of their own sensitivity and frightened by its implications. (123)

However, the blues resulting from Armstrong's death fail to unify the individuals and communities because of the difference between the black and white blues. In addition to the ability to sing the blues, the blues that develop after Todd's death also increase the racial gap in Campbell's novel by maintaining the distinction between black and white blues. Delotha and Wydell represent the black blues. For instance, "Delotha felt a sickening churning low in her stomach; she slammed her free hand to her mouth. Too late. Vomit thick as sludge pushed through her splayed fingers" (55). In a similar way, "Wydell's knees began to wobble, and he started sobbing, holding on to the railing that set off the pulpit" (111). At the funeral, he notices "a tiny woman crying for her son. Their son. His stomach was lurching and quivering; he felt hot and nauseated. He had to have some air; he couldn't breathe" (112). Delotha and Wydell's blues stem from the unjustified and cold-blooded murder of their son. Wydell says to the bartender, "Listen. The white people killed my boy" (152). These blues are about Armstrong Todd and the loss of his

life at the hands of white men. They reflect a sad and human emotion of a wronged family.

In contrast, both Lily and Floyd's blues reflect a self-consuming, self-pitying attitude, lacking any remorse or guilt concerning their role in the murder. These two characters fail to recognize their actions as immoral and wrong; and, as a result, they blame others for the repercussions they currently suffer. After losing the pool hall, Floyd "was silent for a moment; then he yelled, 'I ain't never mistreated nobody'" (137). Even after killing Armstrong Todd in cold blood, he refuses to accept responsibility for his blues. For instance, he blames Lily because

[i]f it hadn't been for her, he'd still have his business. He wouldn't have to be digging ditches with niggers for two dollars a day. If she'd listened to him and stayed out of the place like he told her to, they wouldn't be eating surplus government food like they was. . . .(139)

He also blames his blues on his family. He says,

'I told you I handled that boy. I told you. But no, no, it wasn't good enough for you. You said I had to teach that boy a lesson. So that's what we set out to do. The three of us. We all was in on it, Daddy. All of us. . . .' He was almost whining now, his voice high and trembly, his eyes searching his father's expressionless face. 'Now

you're blaming me. I done what you wanted me to do.' (141)

Floyd's blues, void of any regret concerning the murder, reflect the racial division between Campbell's individual black and white characters. His reaction to the situation aligns itself with the white perspective in Campbell's novel, and as a result, his having the blues does little to unify the community. Instead, it promotes segregation. Although Armstrong Todd's death creates the blues for both the Todds and the Coxes, the similarity stops there. The murder touches all of Campbell's characters regardless of race, but the difference between the blues of the black characters and those of the white characters underlies the racial separation of the individuals and the two communities in the novel.

Campbell preserves the distinction between the blacks and whites by establishing a black blues and a white blues. On one hand, she uses the ability or the inability to sing the blues as a way to separate her characters, for her white characters cannot sing the blues. On the other hand, she depicts the blues of the Todds and those of the Coxes to emphasize the contrast between black blues and white blues. As Campbell's title Your Blues Ain't Like Mine suggests, her novel develops a comparison between the blues of blacks and whites. The differences separate her black and white characters on both the individual and the communal level as demonstrated in the equation  $I_b + I_w = C_b + C_w$ . Campbell

does not imagine a community where all come together regardless of the circumstances. She acknowledges the racial division that remains a dominant feature of our society; consequently, she categorizes the blues, the individuals, and the communities as either black or white. Through this approach, Bebe Moore Campbell highlights troublesome social and cultural realities that inform her title, Your Blues Ain't Like Mine.



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